Grappling with the Stranglehold of the Past over Time
A Response

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Content

I cannot do justice to the rich and thoughtful comments on my essay "Dealing with Painful Memories and Violent Pasts: Towards a Framework for Contextual Understanding" in this short response. The respondents who so graciously shared their thoughts have provided much to consider; I can only touch on the implications. I will not dwell on the commonalities in the approaches put forward by the commentators and myself, but rather focus on the divergences or elaborations posed by their insightful comments.

Suffice to say, the commentators and I seem to share a concern with understanding the impact of political violence in as much depth and nuance as possible, all holding a deeply contextual view of how societies and individuals in the aftermath of war and repression reconstruct meaning in social, political and psychological terms. This is, as David Becker adds, reiterating some of my points in my essay, always a political process and concerns power relationships. Becker also concurs with me that such processes and the outcomes that follow are inevitably fraught, incomplete and ambivalent.

That said, as a starting point I draw on Undine Whande's eloquent comment that healing "is more a dissolution of the stranglehold of the past on future generations than a resolution". This phrase captures the essence of what several of the respondents convey, that is, although I provide a framework for understanding the gaps and challenges of reconciling individual and societal political challenges, there are ongoing questions about how my framework applies over time where the past still permeates the present. With this in mind, I have chosen to comment on four issues that could enhance the framework I put forward in my essay.

1 Intergroup dynamics and persistent narratives

A theme across the commentaries is the importance of damaging narratives in societies emerging from conflict. Drawing on Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), Olivera Simić reminds us how competing narratives of suffering can be persistent and can continue to be "fought with other means" long after formal hostilities have ended. Andrea Zemskov-Züge adds that there is a silence in the Georgian and Abkhazian context, where neither side remembers "details about the past that do not fit their world views". Competing narratives are fostered, perpetuating conflict.

These comments are useful in reminding the reader, as I have noted elsewhere (Hamber 2012), that how transitional justice interventions link to intergroup relations remains largely undertheorised and under-researched, with a few exceptions (e.g. Aiken 2010; Arthur 2011). In other words, one way to expand the framework I present in my essay is to consider the intergroup dimensions and saturating nature of identity politics in more detail. As I note in the essay, but do not expand substantially, there is a need to delve into the worlds of power, not only at the national level, but also within and between groups.

Simić supports my call to create a "framework of meaning at the collective level" but is concerned that in some societies this is not possible, such as BiH, where the collective context is dominated by a culture of victimhood and denial. Becker too reminds us that alternative truths exist in the Israeli and Palestinian context that seemingly cannot be reconciled into one narrative, essentially arguing that accepting a multiplicity of narratives might be a pragmatic option. Zemskov-Züge raises a further complication in the case of Georgia and Abkhazia, where victims and perpetrators no longer live together. The structural distance allows different narratives to persevere and each society to mutually "hide" behind a pretense of harmony.

Simić's paper reminds us that victims have their own agency, narratives and identity politics. Competing hierarchies of suffering, she argues, can result in different groups assuming "a monopoly on suffering and a power of veto on reconciliation". This can be the result of victims themselves but may also

be due to the manipulation of the status of victimhood "by political elites". Zemskov-Züge also notes how victims are politically exploited in the Georgian-Abkhaz context.

Victims, as Simić concludes, can therefore be both agents of positive social change and agents of resistance to new reconciliatory narratives. Therefore, although in my essay I talk of victims generically and the importance of guaranteeing their rights, if the framework I develop is to be expanded, Simić reminds us that a more detailed focus on the politics of victimhood is needed. To really get to grips with this, as I note in my essay, we need to problematise the power relationships implicit in dealing with the past, for example, the power dynamics and incentives implicit in championing different approaches ("reconciliation", "justice", "forgiveness", "forgetting").

The commentaries also have implications for transitional justice mechanisms more broadly, although the respondents do not expand into this arena. Transitional justice mechanisms can create a context where intergroup relations can be fostered, but equally have risks and could, under certain circumstances, aggravate intergroup conflict. For example, as I point out and expand upon elsewhere (Hamber 2012), political trials can create a new national narrative that can build civic trust as those guilty of violations are prosecuted (Fletcher / Weinstein 2002). At the same time, if perpetrators represent a specific ethnic group, there is no guarantee that prosecutions will enhance intergroup relationships. Groups could become further estranged as one group sees the offenders as perpetrators and the other as martyrs or the "new victims" of a successor regime.

Likewise, truth commissions can mark a social and political attempt by politicians to take stock of the past, acknowledge atrocities, and symbolically allow different groups previously in conflict to commit to a new future (Hamber 2012). But they too, if not undertaken properly, can reinforce certain narratives. A modest expectation of the potential impact of transitional justice mechanisms is therefore needed when thinking about how they might improve intergroup relations. As a result, a number of the commentators note, as I do in my essay, that culturally appropriate initiatives will need to run alongside transitional justice processes to aid intergroup transformation such as contact, trust-building processes, therapeutic and psychosocial interventions, dialogue, traditional practices, museums, developing new curricula, opening archives, public education, and art projects. As Zemskov-Züge notes, this can all add pluralistic meanings to the past.

But none of this can be divorced from the social and political realities such as inequality, economic problems, tenacious and negative government discourse about "the other", and ongoing discrimination in different forms (race, gender, class, etc.), if they exist. Such factors all have the potential of exacerbating and creating new social fissures, despite transitional justice, peacebuilding or psychosocial initiatives. Many of those I know who testified before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa have become more negative about the experience over time. This is not a failure of the TRC as such, but the failure to take some of its recommendations into the present and to effect real change in people's lives.

2 Inter-generational nature of dealing with the past

Once we accept the long-term nature of dealing with the past, Undine Whande's call to look at the past through an inter-generational lens is to be welcomed. She is correct in mentioning that my essay does not directly tackle this issue. This is a reflection of the framing of the essay, which was focused on the impact of transitional justice processes on those who go through them or have been directly affected. But I am grateful for Whande's suggestions, as she beckons a deeper look at the implications of addressing the past across generations.

That said, I am not sure if a desire to understand the past from one generation to the next is predictable, inevitable or generalisable. What happens inter-generationally is dependent on what has gone before and the nature of the present. The memories and associated traumas of the past are not carbon-copied from one generation to the next, but rather take on a life of their own, manifesting in a myriad of ways. A transparent, public process of discussing the past will have a different outcome than social silence about human rights violations or where identity politics go unchallenged across the years. As Whande points out, and I agree, how future generations will see the past will be linked to whether they have been freed from the "stranglehold" both practically (say in terms of still living in poverty or not) or how identity politics are played out in the present.

To link this to the South Africa context, the question, therefore, is not "did the TRC uncover the past sufficiently", but how was the past carried into the present and how is it reflected upon today. Obvious shortcomings in South Africa were the lack of public education that followed the TRC process and the failure to prosecute those that who did not avail themselves of the TRC amnesty. As a result, as Whande powerfully notes: "The TRC reached only a limited number of people in a direct, tangible way, yet it left behind a footprint of the nation's attempt to "face the past" for future generations to rediscover."

But to extend Whande's thinking, perhaps it is the depth and size of the footprint, in terms of the attempts to deal with the past at the time and shortly afterwards, that will affect how or if a new generation will find "its own struggle". The shape of this struggle will be determined by the past and present. To this end, a campaign such as *Rhodes Must Fall*, which Whande discusses, is about the failure of not adequately dealing with the past, the inability of those who lived through apartheid to constructively unpack the past for a new generation, and a frustration with the present to offer a vision of a better future.

To put this another way, the context of the present continually reshapes how we look at the past, as well as how we use the past in the present. As I note in my essay, although lessons may be learned (as the phrase goes), that does not mean we will apply them in the present. We continue to "remember" the past and "reinvent" it depending on the ever-shifting context. This is even more so for those who did not experience it directly, such as young people, who feel its after-shocks and walk in its shadow. This, as Whande notes, is amplified in the current war-like reality of poverty, crime and domestic violence experienced by thousands in South Africa today.

What I would add, however, is that there is also an unwritten gendering of such contexts. We need to ask why it is that it is largely men who carry direct violence from generation to generation, and how certain forms of being have become entrenched in our political systems (e.g. male-dominated parliamentary structures built around aggression and dominance). Yet the issue of masculinity is seldom discussed, and if it is, generally only in narrow terms focusing solely on persistent violent masculinities. As I have outlined (see lead article in this volume), in societies such as South Africa, a focus on the direct political and criminal violence often overshadows the violence embedded in everyday life: on the sports field, in the classroom, in the home, in public spaces, in language and in the media, most of which has a strong tendency to reinforce certain types of hegemonic (often violent, silencing and oppressive) masculinities. The result of all this is that for most citizens, the more brutal masculinities of those involved in direct violence (combatants, police, the military, violent protestors, criminals, those who assault their partners) are deeply enmeshed with the violence of the everyday (see Hamber 2016).

Ongoing violence is not simply the result of the moments of "exceptionality" seen in the past (e.g. torture, disappearance) carried out by far smaller numbers of people (former combatants or soldiers) slipping into the present and exacerbating other issues such as domestic violence. In fact, it may well be the opposite, and the moments of exceptionality were made possible by the direct, cultural and structural violence of the everyday. The question is, therefore, not only how to prevent violent masculinities manifesting from generation to generation through trying to change the actions of individuals or groups of men (and some women), but also how to stop pervasive masculinities that marginalise the poor, distort community and family life, and corrupt our political systems, not only through the naked exercise of power, but also through the hidden masculine cultures operating within a variety of hierarchies and social spaces (Hamber 2016).

3 Sequences, context and traumatisation

Becker argues that sequential traumatisation as a concept bridges the psychological and social dimensions of political violence. He eloquently outlines the concept in his response, so I will not repeat it here. Elsewhere, I have also written at length about Keilson's concept of sequential traumatisation (Hamber 2009) and why I think it is a useful way to frame how we think about the impact of extreme violence, so I can only echo Becker's sentiments. Thinking of trauma sequentially means asking the question: How is dealing with the legacy of a politically violent past different during times of conflict, in transition, and during times of peace?

The following extract is from a radio show on 28 January 2008, documenting the voices of survivors of the La Mon Hotel bombing by the IRA in 1978 in which 12 people died. The comments highlight their unhappiness with Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and now working in government with Sinn Féin, who are closely linked with the IRA. The survivors are seemingly, or had been, DUP supporters:

> "(…) for years, we have been told by the Democratic Unionist Party that they wanted investigations carried out (…) to find out who was behind it. Since Paisley and McGuinness got together, we haven't heard one thing about these inquiries…Personally, when I see Paisley and McGuinness [Sinn Féin and Deputy First Minister] together and see them chuckling (…) Aah (…) when people like ourselves sit and watch on the television that sort of thing going on, it would really make you sick. It would make your stomach turn. After all these promises about never sitting down [together] (…) it really is annoying."

What is evident from this excerpt is that for survivors, a transition to peace brings its own challenges. Once the conflict is over, individuals can be left questioning the meaning of their suffering and what its significance is in a changed context. For the victim quoted above, it highlights that moving on for them is different from what moving on means for politicians. They feel distressed that the political party they support is now working with "the enemy". At a macro level, the changes the comments refer to are ostensibly positive as a peace agreement has been forged in Northern Ireland. But at the same time, for some individuals, peace has negatively altered their meaning system. Thus, victimisation is not only tied to specific historical incidents, but is also continually reinterpreted across time and differently in different contexts. If the theory of sequential traumatisation is right, as Becker proposes, we can therefore expect people to experience different mental health impacts at different moments in time. We have, therefore, to continually pay attention to the changing context and understand its implications, and by extension we should see changing the context as a psychological intervention.

A further question is whether the concept of sequential traumatisation may be pertinent to the types of concerns that Whande raises about those who have not experienced the violence of the past directly but have absorbed "the unspoken and unprocessed past fears and sufferings of their parents". As noted, I firstly think this depends on how the past was dealt with, or the size of the transitional justice footprint, for want of a better way of putting this. What we know in South Africa, for example, is that some attempts were made to deal with the past, but the footprint was not as deep as it could have been. Secondly, it relates to the politics of the present and if a new future can be imagined and realised. In the absence of the latter, and to draw on Keilson, the present will become yet another persecutory sequence. But more theorising is needed here.

That said, in South Africa and many other places, the stranglehold of the past remains that where you are born, and to whom, still largely determines your future and what you might achieve. This must change

if we are to truly change the impact and meaning of the past in the present. But I have no magical solution how to change the macro and micro socio-economic contexts that so pervasively affect us all. To quote the French economist, Thomas Piketty, "the distribution of wealth is too important an issue to be left to economists, sociologists, historians, and philosophers" – and I would add psychologists to the list. This, however, does not preclude us all engaging in the debate.

4 Thinking holistically

There is much in my essay about the importance of thinking about holistic ways of dealing with the past. To this end, I am not surprised that both Whande and Becker picked up on my use of the intervention pyramid contained in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (2007). Becker notes that "While I don't doubt the good intentions behind this pyramid, to me it seems to cement a separation between *basic needs* (i.e. physical needs) and *psychological needs*, creating a false hierarchy and furthering the confusion of reality". Whande echoes this and is not convinced that "there really is a needs pyramid (...) where some needs are deemed more important than others". Given these comments, I feel compelled to respond about my use of the IASC pyramid and will use this as a way to make some concluding comments.

Zemskov-Züge, in her response, notes that in my essay I write as an "expert insider" and she largely works as an "external expert" supporting local people who are willing to work on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Certainly, in the South African, and probably the Northern Ireland context at this stage, I can claim the position of an "insider" ("expert" is perhaps a term others should confer rather than oneself). However, interestingly, when I used the IASC model I was essentially targeting "external experts", and by this I mean those who perhaps come to the issue of thinking about victims' needs in political contexts as development and humanitarian aid workers, or peacebuilding practitioners. To this audience, who are often "sold" various psychological treatments as the panacea to victims' needs, I wanted to make the point that a range of needs exists and in fact specialist psychological and psychiatric services are a very small part of the picture. The IASC pyramid served this rudimentary purpose for essentially making an argument about resource allocation, but I accept that as a model it "confuses reality" as Becker notes.

Like Becker and Whande, I think the IASC pyramid does not show sufficient interrelationship between different needs and levels – perhaps I should have made that clearer. It is also not, and I did not mean it in that way, another form of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs at an individual level, although it is easy to see how it can be read in that way. In my more recent work, I and others have criticised the notion of "psychosocial" as it still largely implies a fairly mechanistic interaction between the "psycho" and the "social", and the IASC pyramid does the same (Hamber/Gallagher/Weine/Agger et al. 2015). I concur with Becker that the binary between social and psychological is essentially an "illusion". In my essay I quote Williamson and Robinson (2006), who say that one cannot compartmentalise mental and emotional issues as distinct from physical and material issues; they are not only interrelated but also indistinguishable.

Therefore, although the concept of psychosocial is helpful and extends the boundaries of theory and practice beyond the individual, it misses key dimensions of human experience (Hamber/Gallagher/Weine/Agger et al. 2015). That is, the emotional and psychological, and the material and social, cannot be separated out and interventions that focus on one side of the "psycho" or "social" equation or the other (although useful at times for individuals), or models that imply the "psycho" or "social" affects the other in a linear or even dynamic way, do not conceptually grasp how people live their lives and how their sense of well-being is constructed (ibid.).

That said, to find the words to capture this composite reality, or to outline what this means in practice for societies emerging from conflict, is not easy. I am grateful to Becker and Whande for raising the issue,

but equally think much work remains to fully understand how psychosocial interventions integrate, interact or are linked to the social context and to potentially transformative changes for both individuals and societies. In my own and others' recent work, we have started to consider this difficult question (Hamber/Gallagher/Weine/DasGupta et al. 2015).

However, what we do know, to go back to my earlier use of the word "exceptional", is that for many experiencing extreme political violence, their suffering is not just about the exceptional (meaning human rights violations such as murder, torture, disappearance). Of course these can be features of a repressive context and can be devastating, but in most cases violence is not a one-off or isolated event, and social problems are not merely variables affecting mental health that come and go with governments. Rather, life is a series of daily stressors of different kinds and magnitudes that cannot be disentangled easily or experienced in some sort of isolated way; they also generally persist long into the future (Hamber/ Palmary/Nunez 2015). Such experiences cannot be captured by or fully represented by a series of projects or programmes, or one-dimensional models, as coming to terms with the past and human rights violations is essentially a personal lifelong project requiring different approaches and social practices at different moments that will shift and change with time. To fully capture this process, I conclude with a quote from a recent work (ibid., 178):

> "Clearly, a holistic approach would be best, but what this means in the complex world (…) is almost impossible to define – but what we now know...is that the everyday experience of life, psychological wellbeing, spiritual enrichment and material existence are interconnected, interlinked and often indistinguishable. No healing approach (…) fully captures this. In the final instance, however, what seems to be at the core of the distress which is used as the driving force to seek out healing of some sort is a desire to make sense of what is happening in the precarious world (…) To this end (…) [it all shows] the importance of meaning making within the healing process no matter how it is finally addressed."

5 References

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